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ABSTRACT

Blue ribbon commissions in the United States from 1965-1983 are discussed with attention to what makes a commission effective, the history of blue ribbon commissions, features of a commission, whether these commissions are useful on campus, and criticisms of blue ribbon commissions. Factors that contribute to the effectiveness of a blue ribbon commission include: attainability of commission objectives, adequacy of the amount of time allotted for the study; number of times commissioners meet; accessibility of commissioners to persons wishing to comment; and sufficiency of the number of staff. Features of a blue ribbon commission are: a predetermined life span, eminent individuals from a variety of backgrounds, staff and funds to assist in fulfilling its charge, and a charge to investigate and/or to recommend changes in structures, functions, origins, or processes. Blue ribbon commissions are helpful on campus when a fresh view is needed about a specific issue, when a college wants to develop ties with, or serve, a sector outside the college, and when a college seeks to start a planning agenda to become a leader in a region or among similar colleges. (SW)

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ERIC DIGEST

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Blue Ribbon Commissions and Higher Education

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Leaders in the field of education at the national, state, and campus levels have wrestled over the past several decades with the question of how to develop the optimum kind of structure to address policy issues and concerns of higher education. A frequent technique or mechanism has been the use of blue ribbon commissions. Some blue ribbon commissions have been considered effective because they seem to have produced changes in higher education. However, many reports intended for use in planning have ended up on a shelf unused. This monograph includes a systematic review of blue ribbon commissions in the nation from 1965–1983 and looks at, among other facts, the number, purpose, authorizing bodies, composition, and recommendations of these commissions. It also includes: an in-depth study of two blue ribbon commissions, the Rosenberg Commission in Maryland and the Wessell Commission in New York; explores the extent to which selected persons judge the use of blue ribbon commissions to be an effective vehicle for change in higher education; and considers what specific characteristics of blue ribbon commissions seem to be related to their effectiveness in terms of changes which can be attributed to the final commission reports.

What Makes a Blue Ribbon Commission Effective?

The following factors appear to contribute to the effectiveness of a blue ribbon commission: attainability of commission objectives; adequacy of the amount of time allotted for the study; number of times commissioners meet; accessibility of commissioners to persons wishing to comment; sufficiency of the number of staff; selection of staff on the basis of merit alone; depth and breadth of background research conducted by staff; consideration of testimony from public hearings; favorable media reaction; repeated use of experts other than commission members and staff; ample substantiation of commission recommendations in the final report; consideration of the political potency of major affected interests in the implementation process; and the activity of the majority of commissioners in the implementation process.

History of Blue Ribbon Commissions

Historically, the use of blue ribbon commissions in education is not an isolated or recent phenomenon. They occur at the national, state, and campus levels. Indeed, since 1929, there have been nearly 50 such commissions at the national level and, since 1965, there have been more than 50 blue ribbon commissions established at the state level.

Such commissions were established in the 1920s to investigate, plan, and assess higher education. At that time they tended to be concerned with broad policies. This outlook was modified during the 1940s and 1950s when special commissions were asked to help states focus on specific policy issues. During the 1960s blue ribbon commissions fell from favor. Critics suggested that such groups had only limited effectiveness since experts, convened for a time to conduct a specific study, inevitably were restricted in perspective, while the issues under investigation often were ongoing and bound to persist beyond the assigned time frame. Nonetheless, blue ribbon panels had great impact during this period as is apparent

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when one recognizes that the creation of numerous state coordinating boards was a product of special commissions. Although little has been written regarding the total number of these commissions and their effectiveness, their use has continued. Indeed, 25 states reported that, between 1965 and 1983, either the governor or legislature had established at least one blue ribbon commission. Of these, 20 states had issued a broad charge to one or more of their respective commissions to explore issues such as access, enrollments, financing, student transfer policy, adult education, governance, program duplication, and long-range planning. This does not imply that special commissions are exclusively concerned with higher education. Special elementary/secondary commissions in recent years have addressed topics including accountability in schools, vocational education, school finances, the implementation of desegregation regulations, and general planning for the future.

What Is a Blue Ribbon Commission?

A blue ribbon commission has the following characteristics: (a) a predetermined life span; (b) eminent individuals from a variety of backgrounds; (c) staff and funds to assist in fulfilling its charge; (d) a charge to investigate and/or to recommend changes in structures, functions, origins, or processes. Such commissions have been charged to study and make recommendations on issues ranging from the very narrow, such as the feasibility of establishing a branch campus, to very broad areas of concern, such as the improvement of the full range of educational opportunities in a state. They have been established also for the purpose of ameliorating an existing crisis situation.

Are Blue Ribbon Commissions Useful on Campus?

Campuses traditionally rely upon members of their own community to come together in ad hoc groups to attempt resolution on important issues. However, there are occasions where outside assistance is helpful and a blue ribbon panel might contribute. For example, campuses can become deeply divided over a specific issue, and a fresh view may be required to resolve the problem in a manner that will settle the immediate question and reduce (or eliminate) the level of rancor so that the campus might be united again. Another situation that calls for an outside panel of experts is when a college or university seeks to develop ties with, or expand its services to, a particular sector outside the institution. A third situation where a blue ribbon commission might be appropriate is when a college or university seeks to establish a planning agenda to move it to a position of leadership in a region or among institutions of similar size and mission.

Blue Ribbon Commissions Criticized

Certain criticisms have been leveled at the blue ribbon commission approach to planning and problem solving. Some criticisms allege that commissions tend to exaggerate the problems they address; that they draw broad and general conclusions rather than specific and adventurous conclusions; that their recommendations are beyond the financial means of those who would implement them; that they fail to spell out the details of their proposals; that they fail to document their proposed solutions.

While there may be some validity to these criticisms with regard to some blue ribbon commissions, the flaws are not universally true, nor are the criticisms irrefutable.

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